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# Streets of Orthodoxy: Developing religious tourism in the Mount Paiko area, Central Macedonia, Greece.

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Religion and faith have always been strong motivations affecting society's evolution and people's actions. Additionally, religion and pilgrimage in contemporary societies have, among others, considerable economic implications. Religious tourism, an emerging form of tourism activity for many destinations, plays an important role for local economies. Rural economies can rely upon religious tourism as a supplementary source of income in many environments, to supplement agricultural income.

This paper, addresses issues regarding religious tourism development in a mountainous area in Greece, rich in religious as well as cultural and natural tourist attractions. The paper also highlights the role of the church as a key stakeholder for local economic and social development. The area of Mount Paiko, in the Region of Central Macedonia in Northern Greece, is considering as one of the less developed mountainous regions in mainland Greece; due to its remoteness and lack of any other type of economic activity, apart from agriculture. However, it has an interesting religious and cultural resource base, where the development of religious tourism could be considered as a supplementary activity with beneficial economic impacts, not just for the specific local area.

For the aforementioned reasons, local key stakeholders - such as community, local authorities, church, educational institutions etc. - are working together on this offering for the area, developing a 'route map' that includes certain initiatives. The paper highlights the contribution of one of the key stakeholders - the local church represented by the Diocese of Goumenissa - and the development role they can play as a key local partner. The Diocese implemented a Marketing Plan that was carried out by the Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management of Alexander TEI Thessaloniki, also a major local stakeholder, with the scope to analyse and justify the perspectives of developing religious tourism in the Mount Paiko area.

**Key Words:** Diocese of Goumenissa, religious tourism, tourism resource base, local stakeholders, key stakeholders, Central Macedonia, marketing plan, Mount Paiko.

## Introduction

Religion is based on the idea of the 'supreme being' (Eliade, 1987), an idea existing since the early years of human kind. Religious tourism is not a new idea either. It is rather the oldest, the most important form of tourism in the history of mankind. Religious tourism must be conceived as one of the earliest forms of tourism since the idea of religious pilgrimage begins very early in human history.

Contemporary 'religious heritage' is evolving as an important element of the so called 'tourism attractions' (Yale, 1991), with an important market share of worldwide tourism. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2010), an estimated 300 to 330 million pilgrims visit the world's key religious sites every year.

People have travelled to holy sites since early history. For instance, the desire to embark on a journey for religious purposes inspired Greeks and non-Greeks to make their way to religious sites throughout the ancient world. Especially for Greek people, this form of travel has long been a major custom; to express their religious sentiments, their deep faith and their reverence for God, is a key characteristic of the Orthodox faith for more than 2000 years.

There is a direct link between religion, as a cultural phenomenon, and tourism. Today, visitors in Greece can find a huge number of internationally known churches and monasteries of the Byzantine era, related to Orthodox Christianity. They may also come across countless churches and so called *metochia* (monastery grounds and gardens) as well as various pilgrimage and religious sites that are less known. Some of Greece's most important religious centres, known worldwide

and officially promoted, include the monastic community of Mount Athos in Central Macedonia, the impressive monasteries of Meteora in Thessaly, the Cave of the Apocalypse in the Monastery of Saint John Theologos on Patmos island<sup>[1]</sup> and the Panayia (Madonna) of Tinos on the island of Tinos (G.N.T.O., 2015). In this list we also can add a number of sacred places like the ones along Saint Paul's journey from Philippi, Thessaloniki, and Veria on the north, to Athens and Corinth to the south of Greece.

When thinking of religious tourism, most communities tend to believe that this form of tourism does not apply to their locale, unless they are a major pilgrimage destination. This is not true, since religious tourism attracts a wide range of tourists from different market segments such as heritage tourism, nature tourism even mass tourism.

### Religious Tourism: Definitions, motivations and forms.

There is a wide spectrum of definitions on religious tourism. They vary from the visitation of a particular 'holy' destination, to individual or group travel:

*with the core motive of experiencing religious forms, or the products they induce, like art, culture, traditions and architecture* (SIGA, 2012).

Religious tourism can often combine travel for leisure, culture and gastronomy. Religious travel, in many case, can be the primary reason for traveling to a destination, but also can be combined with other tourist attractions. Another dimension of religious tourism is that, a visitor may not always be considered as a pilgrim. In most cases it is also assumed that a traveller must be of a particular religion, in order to visit a specific religious site (Raj & Morpeth, 2007). This is the case when, for example, a Christian pilgrim visits the Holy Grave in Jerusalem at Easter time or St. Paul's in the Vatican for Christmas. But also, we must accept, that a great number of Christians and non-Christians, may also visit such religiously important sites both for their spirituality, but also for their historical or architectural value. 'Christian travel', namely Christians travelling

with religious motives, today includes a large number of tourism visits worldwide, forming in this way pilgrimage as well as non-pilgrimage forms of travel (Ron, 2009).

Religious tourism can be categorized into various types. Gisbert (1992), distinguishes tourism in two forms: *short-term religious tourism*, which includes excursions to nearby pilgrimage centres or religious conferences and *long-term religious tourism*, that describes visits of several days or weeks to national and international pilgrimage sites or conferences. Additionally, organisational forms of religious tourism can be distinguished by other definitive characteristics, such as number of participants, means of transportation, combination of travel experiences etc. (Gisbert, 1992). Finally, it is important to define religious tourism and pilgrimage tourism. It clear that *pilgrimage tourism* has to do exclusively with more religious motives, like spirituality and worshipping, while in *religious tourism* the visitor to a religious destination, may express additional interests like local history and culture, natural environment and local gastronomy etc.

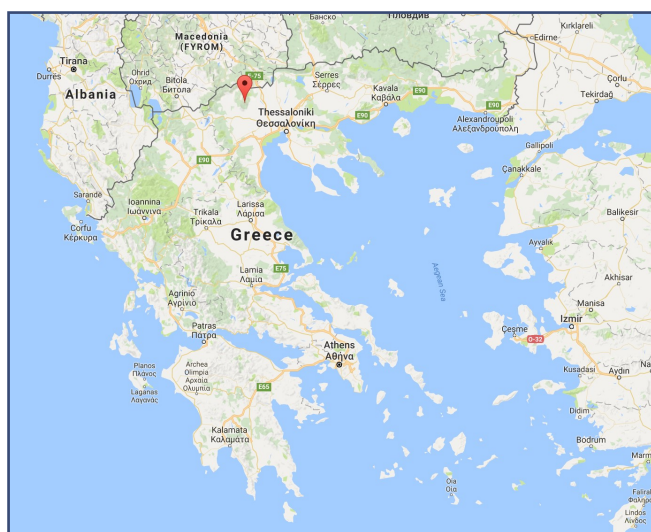
### Religious Tourism as a Regional Development Tool

Religious tourism as a special form of tourism, has a number of social, economic as well as environmental effects on local communities at the destination. Among others, the interaction between the visitor and the host communities is a solid outcome that gives unique experiences for both parties (Cohen, 1972).

In Greece, apart from the major internationally well-known sites, there is a great number of less-known religious tourism destinations that form an interesting resource base for developing religious tourism. Churches and monasteries with worshipping ceremonies, combined with other tourist attraction elements, such as tradition and culture, nature and gastronomy, can lead to the formation of new emerging tourist destinations, introducing tourist activity that finally acts as a regional development tool for the remote areas of the country. This is the idea behind which, last decade, certain initiatives have been undertaken in the Mount Paiko area, in order to develop the area as a new tourist destination by incorporating such tourism attractors as religion, natural environment, culture and gastronomy.

1) For *Meteora* in Thessaly, see [http://www.visitgreece.gr/en/culture/easter\\_at\\_meteora](http://www.visitgreece.gr/en/culture/easter_at_meteora);  
For the *Cave of the Apocalypse* in the *Monastery of Saint John Theologos* see [http://www.visitgreece.gr/en/religion/easter\\_on\\_the\\_island\\_of\\_the\\_apocalypse](http://www.visitgreece.gr/en/religion/easter_on_the_island_of_the_apocalypse) and [http://www.visitgreece.gr/en/culture/world\\_heritage\\_sites/aghios\\_ioannis\\_theologos\\_monastery](http://www.visitgreece.gr/en/culture/world_heritage_sites/aghios_ioannis_theologos_monastery)

### Location of Mount Paiko



Source: Google Maps

## The Mount Paiko Area: Profile and stakeholders

The Mount Paiko area is a mountainous less developed area, in the Region of Central Macedonia, Northern Greece. Historically, due to its remoteness, this has been an agricultural area with many economic and social problems. The decreasing of population, mainly based on the post war urbanisation phenomenon, was a key factor that kept development opportunities away from the area. Nevertheless, the absence of intensive economic activity maintained a very high degree of quality in the natural environment, recognised and being part of the European Union's 'Natura 2000' most interesting ecosystems network (GR1240003). During the last two decades, there has been an ongoing discussion and various relevant initiatives to introduce tourism in the area as an alternative, to supplement agriculture as the only economic activity. This was reinforced by the existence of financial tools from the European Union's Regional Fund and especially by the LEADER PLUS initiative for the development of rural areas of Europe (Iakovidou *et al.*, 1994; Kilipiris, 2002; Kilipiris *et al.*, 2002). Since then, certain projects were implemented in the form of basic tourism infrastructures related to the local road network, village and monument restorations etc. Towards this direction, a number of basic key-stakeholders have been activated including:

- *The Municipality of Peonia*, that represents the local authority in the mount Paiko area.
- *The Kilkis Development Agency*, a prefectural local development body that manages all the LEADER PLUS projects implemented locally.

- *The Region of Central Macedonia Administration*, forming the regional authority in the area, that manages all the European funding for the region.
- *The Local Entrepreneurs Association*, which includes tourism as well as the rest of businesses, directly or indirectly related with tourism in the area.
- *The Mitropolis of Goumenissa, Axioupolis and Polykastro* (Goumenissa Diocese) that covers spiritually the worshipping people of Mount Paiko area.

## Developing Religious Tourism in the Area: Targets and expected outcomes

Since its foundation, in the early 1990s, the Diocese of Goumenissa and its head, Bishop Dimitrios, identified apart from its spiritual role, also a development role for the area. The objective of developing religious tourism in the Mount Paiko area was of prime priority and this was defined in Diocese's Master Development Plan (MDP, 2000) in early year 2000. The basic target was the restoration and innovation of the religious monuments in the area. Another target was the development of religious tourism and the interconnection with other tourist attractor elements in the area such as culture and nature, wine and gastronomy (the area is realized as one of the most important wine areas of continental Greece). This variety and combination of tourism products can lead to a unique tourist experience attracting visitors to the area.

Other outcomes of the master plan were targeted:

- a) promoting the area nationally and internationally;
- b) improving the financial as well as social level of life for locals;
- c) creating new work opportunities as well new forms of entrepreneurship;
- d) reducing the urbanisation trend, especially among young locals, and;
- e) building infrastructures beneficial for both visitors and locals.

## Profile of Goumenissa Diocese

The Mitropolis (Diocese) of Goumenissa is a relatively newly founded diocese in the area (1991). Its spiritual jurisdiction extends to over 45 communities with a population of 50,000 people, of which, 32,000 are in the Mount Paiko area. In the Diocese's jurisdiction belong three monasteries (St. Raphael Monastery of



Griva, Panayia Monastery of Goumenissa and the Holy Monastery of St. George) and also the (under restoration) Cathedral Church of St. George of Goumenissa. The Diocese is managed by bishop Dimitrios and the metropolitan council. The bishop is the head of approximately 45 priests and almost 30 monks and nuns in the above mentioned monasteries, several of whom have either an academic or professional background as engineers (civil, mechanical and electrical engineers), economists etc. These individuals actively participate in the Diocese's implementation of the various restoration and construction projects.

### The Religious Resource Base

The Diocese has three important monasteries and a number of churches that form an important religious resource base for the area. Specifically:

**The Monastery of Panayia (Madonna)** in Goumenissa is a post Byzantine era monastery. Historical sources suggest that since 1328AD the Byzantine Emperor Ioannis V. Paleologos, offered the entire area as a *metohi* (owed land) to the Iviron Monastery of Ayion Oros (Athos monastic community). Goumenissa town and the broader Mount Paiko area were the Christian centre for the entire area during the period of Ottoman occupation (1430-1912). The temple of the central church monastery, is a late 17<sup>th</sup> century historical temple with interesting frescoes and since 1983 has been officially registered by the Ministry of Culture, as a protected post-Byzantine era monument.

**The Holy Monastery of St. Raphael, Nikolaos and Irini** in the village of Griva is a contemporary period monastery, founded in 1991. The monastery functions as an 'inter orthodox communication centre' and periodically, is visited and manned by priests and

monks from other Orthodox countries, especially ones from Romania and Serbia.

**The Holy Monastery of St. George** is also a newly founded monastery, housing 10 nuns, founded on the ruins of an abandoned middle age period settlement. The central church of the Monastery - the Church of St. George- is an important basilica of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with interesting post-Byzantine era frescoes. Apart from the above mentioned monasteries there are approximately 15 churches in various communities with important frescoes dated from the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The religious resource base of the area is concluded with a number of *paniyiria* (religious fairs) spread throughout the year, that attract a great number of visitors. Visitors come for both pilgrimage purposes as well as for its interesting natural, gastronomical and historical environment. Among these events, the most important is the *Theotokeia* religious fair of Panayia in Goumenissa, (from 15<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> of August). Another major attraction for both pilgrims and tourists that takes place during the Orthodox Easter period, is the worshiping of the Epitaphs in the various churches of the city of Goumenissa - a religious worship accompanied by hymns and local traditional brass bands.

### The Role of the Diocese in Sustainable Tourism Development

The Diocese believes that apart from its clear spiritual mission, it can also have an important role in local development, especially in this remote and less developed region of the country. This is proven by the fact that in the first decade of the Diocese's presence in the area, an estimated average of 50,000 pilgrims visited every year (Kilkis Development Agency, 1997).

Being institutionally an important local key-

**Table 1. Goumenissa Diocese: Basic projects regarding religious infrastructures**

a.	Restoration of the Holy Church (H.C.) of Panayia
b.	Upgrading surrounding environment of Holy Monastery (H.M.) of Panayia
c.	Visitor accommodation facilities and related infrastructures at the H.M. of Panayia
d.	Visitor accommodation facilities and related equipment at the H.M. of Saint Raphael
e.	Botanical garden at the H.M. of Saint Raphael
f.	Icon and artifacts laboratory equipment at the H.M. of Saint Raphael
g.	Restoration of the H. C. of Saint George at Goumenissa
h.	Upgrading surrounding environment of the H. C. of Saint George at Goumenissa

**Table 2. Streets of Orthodoxy Marketing Plan: Activities**

Action	Scope
<b>SWOT Analysis</b>	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats assessment of the Mount Paiko area within the framework of developing a 'unique religious tourism product' in the area. The analysis takes into consideration emerging environmental, economic as well as social challenges.
<b>Market Research</b>	International literature review regarding new trends in religious tourism. Also field research in nearby Thessaloniki tourism market to explore such elements like visitors' awareness over Paiko area as a religious tourism destination, emerging religious, and not
<b>Product Branding &amp; Packaging</b>	Synthesis and production of a 'unique religious tourism product' differentiated by other similar products in the broader area. A product easily identified by the perspective customer-visitor. A unique product package that incorporates, in a complimentary way, other local tourism features like natural environment, history and tradition, wine and gastronomy etc.
<b>Promotion</b>	Identification of traditional distribution channels as well as contemporary sustainable promotional tools using technological enhances as well as new approaches in tourism destination management.

stakeholder, it has the ability, not only to motivate locals towards new forms of economic development such as tourism, but also the perspective to undertake and implement certain related EU funded projects itself. Specifically, regarding developing religious tourism, the Diocese believes that positive effects will come in two dimensions: a) increased visitor numbers in the area will further sustain economic activity of local businesses including tourism businesses (hotels, restaurants, etc.) as well as local farmers who will have the chance to promote their local agricultural products directly to the visitor, b) the monastic community can itself generate financial resources e.g. by producing and promoting Byzantine period icons as well as other religious memorabilia that almost always pilgrims as well as visitors desire to take back home. In this way they can also self-finance their various activities. All these are targeted - as is clearly stated at the Diocese's master development plan:

*for the expansion and sustainability of its spiritual, educational and social role to even larger parts of the local Greek society* (Goumenissa Diocese, 2004).

Within this context, the Diocese initiated a number of projects regarding restoration and renovation of important religious infrastructures in the area. These activities were targeted within a broader plan for developing religious tourism under the name 'Streets of Orthodoxy'. Practically, this project worked as a conceptual network to bring together the monasteries with the most important churches and Orthodox monuments in the area. This prompted a series of activities and projects regarding infrastructures which targeted the facilitation of:

- easier access of the pilgrim-visitor inside this network of monuments;
- interpretation of the religious monuments at the sites;
- the ability for visitor participation in various worshiping and general religious activities.

The Diocese managed to implement a large number of infrastructure projects taking advantage of its highly qualified human resources and by using EU as well as national funding resources. The main projects that the Diocese undertook during the last two decades are shown in Table 1.

Furthermore, this accumulated restoration experience generated the idea of establishing a local summer school targeting local as well as international students. In cooperation with the nearby Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki, School of Architecture and Civil Engineering, a two-week seminar under the name 'Restoring a monument of Orthodox faith' acts as an innovative idea and consequently tourism product, since attendants will also be participating in various tourism activities in the area.

### **The 'Streets of Orthodoxy' Marketing Plan**

In 2014, a few years after the implementation of the basic infrastructures regarding the religious resource base in the area, the need for a marketing plan to complement the Diocese's master plan, became a priority. The project was undertaken by the Department of Tourism & Hospitality Management at Alexander TEI Thessaloniki - the tertiary level tourism educational institution in the nearby city of Thessaloniki.

The marketing plan took into consideration certain variables like contemporary religious tourism trends, new evolving tourism markets especially from the orthodox world of North Eastern and Eastern Europe, as well as such elements as economic crisis inside the country. The marketing plan also incorporates contemporary trends in tourism marketing, like technological advances in tourism promotion and distribution. The actions related to the marketing plan extended on four levels:

- a) A SWOT analysis of the Mount Paiko area;
- b) Market research for market segment profiling and identification;
- c) Branding and packaging of the local tourist product;
- d) Identification of Promotion and Distribution channels for the product.

These activities, along with their scope, are summarised in **Table 2**.

## Results

The Marketing Plan revealed an enormous amount of data and information that gives interesting insight on the perspectives for developing religious tourism in the Mount Paiko area.

Specifically, SWOT Analysis highlighted the surface infrastructural problems like inadequate and problematic road systems due the mountainous and remote nature of the area. Also revealed were other possible competitive destinations that may offer similar product. The rich natural, historical, cultural and gastronomical environment of the area can have a positive contribution in developing a religious tourism product that can offer multiple tourism experiences to the visitor. The field research that was mainly targeted to consumers of the Thessaloniki area, a perspective market of more than one million, revealed, among others, that the destination has no brand image, although it is less than 100km away (Philoxenia, 2015). At the same time, research initiated a high degree of awareness and interest by the respondents to visit the area. Research also revealed interesting information regarding possible market segments and niches, ranging from the pure pilgrimage market, to visitors interested in attending a religious ceremony or ritual even though they are not regular worshippers. In addition, orthodox mass tourists from the nearby Halkidiki resort area expressed an interest to have a

‘religious brake’ in summer time and visit the area for religious purposes.

Another important element is that local communities in the area had no awareness, in some cases were even negative, about tourism as a new economic activity in the area; despite a number of workshops targeting to increase local awareness of tourism development in the area (RCMA, 2014). Findings were better for younger people that live in the area, who see tourism as a chance not only for economic but also for social development.

The need for better synchronisation and cooperation among local key stakeholders is an important element that is challenging the area. The Diocese can play a catalytic role to bring all parties to the same table. Due to its role, it cannot be ‘condemned’ for any political or economic expediencies.

Research also revealed interest from traditional tourism distribution channels, like tour operators specializing in religious tourism. It also highlighted the need for contemporary promotion and distribution channels using information technology advances. Also, adopting successful international practices in destination management, the brand image of the destination would be better promoted if all local key stakeholders agreed to contribute to the formation of a Destination Management Organization (DMO) operated by a professional body.

As an overview it must be noted that the Diocese’s initiative to carry out the ‘Streets of Orthodoxy’ marketing plan managed to:

- Identify the contemporary tourism production processes, tourism attractions and resources;
- Suggest entrepreneurship opportunities for the locals and give them an insight on potential threats and opportunities regarding their business involvement;
- Access the size and financial importance of the niche market of Orthodox Christianity tourism and pilgrimage;
- Introduce the idea of ‘tourism packaging’ and disseminate the idea of added value, by assembling together several components of local tourist and non-tourist production;
- Familiarize local stakeholders with the concept of tourism destination and product promotion, and set its foundations mainly on the basis of cooperative production and marketing.

## Conclusion

Tourism development in an area is a challenge that requires the contribution of two basic key- elements:

- a. Interesting resource base or tourist attractor elements, such as natural and manmade environment, are of prime importance;
- b. The involvement and fully commitment of local key stakeholders that include both private and public interests.

The church can be realised as a public interest body that today, apart from its spiritual mission, can play an important development role, especially for remote and less developed areas where usually, central administration is lacking in efforts and financial means. Taking advantage of the new trends in tourist behaviour (religious and pilgrimage tourism), and the rich historical and cultural reserve related to the Orthodox Christian faith in the Mount Paiko area (churches and monasteries), the Diocese of Goumenissa commits itself to a developmental role for the benefit of local communities. Initiatives such as this become more challenging especially for small communities that are thinking more traditionally about institutions and roles, but through tourism, may bring results, especially in times and for societies plunged into long-standing economic recession.

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